

A Native Perspective on Preschool Suspension and Expulsion

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Native students continue to lag behind their peers in most areas of education. In addition to having low achievement and graduation rates, *and* high dropout rates, Native students have some of the highest rates of school discipline. CRDC data reveals that racial disparities in discipline start in the earliest years of schooling. AI/ANs represent less than 1% of the early childhood population but make up nearly 3% of suspensions and expulsions.¹ Young AI/AN students are also held back a year at nearly twice the rate of white kindergarten students.²

Nationwide, preschool children ages 3 to 4 have been suspended and expelled at alarming rates. The extent of this crisis was revealed in 2012 when preschool data were first included in the CRDC. Data showed that preschool children were being suspended at a rate up to three times higher than students in kindergarten through 12th grade.³

In 2016 the Yale Child Study Center examined the potential role of early childhood educators' implicit biases as a partial explanation to preschool expulsion disparities. Implicit bias is "the automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions in certain ways."⁴ This study found that early educators scrutinized Black children more closely (particularly boys), expecting aggressive or more challenging behavior. Prior research shows that a major predictor of a teacher's action to expel a preschooler is the degree to which the teacher feels the child may pose a danger to the other children. These perceived behaviors are based on teachers' racial stereotypes and implicit biases. Research has shown that biased perceptions and implicit racial attitudes towards students of color are directly linked to disproportionately harsh discipline such as suspensions and expulsions.⁵

At A Glance

This article highlights key findings on preschool suspension and expulsion based on the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) and recent research studies. It also discusses:

- discipline disparities and their impact on young children's mental well-being, and
- culturally responsive practices at the preschool level that can reduce disproportionate discipline practices among American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) preschoolers.

The article will help Parent Centers in:

- working with young children with disabilities who are AI/AN;
- understanding key barriers that young AI/AN students face in their earliest years of schooling and their impact on educational achievement; and
- enhancing relationships with Native parents.

Long-Term Negative Impacts

Punitive discipline measures and low teacher expectations for children of color contribute significantly to racial disparities in school readiness as well as subsequent educational and later-life achievement and opportunity.⁶ Described as the “push-out phenomenon” or the “preschool -to-prison pipeline,” preschool expulsions and suspensions directly undermine young children’s access to educational opportunities. Temporarily or permanently removing a preschooler from the classroom denies the child learning experiences such as following directions, making friends, and gaining confidence and skills that promote social and emotional well-being. The ordeal of being suspended or expelled is both distressing and traumatic for the child and parent. Research shows that children expelled or suspended at the preschool level: (1) experience greater academic failure and grade retention, (2) hold more negative attitudes about school and are less engaged, (3) have higher dropout rates, and (4) face increased rates of incarceration.⁷



Illustration by Chris Buzelli

New Intervention and Prevention Strategies

In 2014 the U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (DHHS) released a joint *Policy Statement* to raise awareness about exclusionary discipline practices as well as the racial and gender disparities within those practices.⁸ The statement provides information about the long-term negative impact of preschool suspension and expulsion on young children and offers recommendations for states and local programs. A major recommendation is the implementation of prevention and intervention strategies to ensure that equitable practices are unbiased and non-discriminatory. New requirements in the Head Start Performance Standards encourage the adoption of specific practices with emphasis on prohibiting the use of suspension and expulsion for challenging behaviors.⁹

In addition, a *Dear Colleague Letter* was issued by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services requiring schools to provide positive behavioral supports to all students with disabilities, including those in preschool.¹⁰ Students with disabilities are more than *twice* as likely as other students to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions.



Home-School Collaboration and Communication

Both USDOE and DHHS are funding the implementation of the **Pyramid Equity Project**, an evidence-based framework for reducing disproportionate discipline practices in early childhood settings. The foundation of the model is building positive relationships with the child, parents, and co-workers. To better support preschoolers in the classroom, increase empathetic understanding of them, and reduce harsh discipline, it is critical for preschool teachers to partner with

families to become familiar with children’s cultural background and practices, as well as family struggles and strengths. This connection with families significantly reduces the likelihood of suspension or expulsion. Find out more at:

<https://www.pyramidmodel.org/resource/suspension-and-expulsion/>

Best Practices and Approaches

Child-centered, culturally responsive approaches are best practices to prevent and address challenging behaviors and reduce exclusionary discipline in preschools.¹¹ Such practices include:

- intentional teaching of social skills,
- raising student expectations, and
- recognition of children’s positive behavior in the context of their culture.

To gain these critical skills, preschool teachers must become aware of their own biases and understand how implicit bias affects their decision making and contributes to disproportionality. They must also learn to effectively manage challenging behaviors in the classroom. Through professional development, preschool teachers can gain strategies for preventing and addressing challenging behaviors and delivering more equitable services.

One exceptional approach that is proving to effectively prepare AI/AN preschoolers for elementary school and beyond is **Native Montessori**, the integration of Native culture and values into the child-centered Montessori education method. Native Montessori validates preschoolers’ cultural heritage as they learn to self-manage and support one another, gaining valuable social and academic skills as well as confidence in themselves as capable learners.

Early childhood programs that value the cultures of their students and the development of the **whole child** promote rather than deny their social/emotional well-being and academic success.

References

¹ Allen, R., & Smith, B.J. (2015, November). *Expelling expulsion: Using the Pyramid Model to prevent suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary inequities in early childhood programs*. Fort Collins, CO: Pyramid Model Consortium. Online at: http://www.pyramidmodel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/expelling_expulsion.pdf

² Gilliam, W.S., Maupin, A.N., Reyes, C.R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016, September). *Do early childhood educators’ implicit bias regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Study Center. Online at: https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/zigler/publications/Preschool%20Implicit%20Bias%20Policy%20Brief_final_9_26_276766_5379_v1.pdf

³ U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014, March). *Data snapshot: Early childhood education* [Issue Brief No. 2]. Washington, DC: Author. Online at: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-early-learning-snapshot.pdf>

⁴ See reference #2.

⁵ See reference #2.

⁶ See reference #2.

⁷ Malik, R. (2017, November 6). *New data reveal 250 preschoolers are suspended or expelled every day*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Online at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2017/11/06/442280/new-data-reveal-250-preschoolers-suspended-expelled-every-day/>

⁸ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.) *Addressing preschool suspension and expulsion: The Pyramid Equity Project*. Washington, DC: Author. Online at: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/fact-sheet-pyramid-equity-project.pdf>

⁹ National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness. (n.d.). *Head Start Program Performance Standards with mental health and social and emotional focus* [Handout 6]. Washington, DC: Author. Online at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/hspps-mental-health-social-emotional-focus-handout-06.pdf>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education. (2016, August). *Dear Colleague letter on supporting behavior of students with disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author. Online at: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/files/dcl-on-pbis-in-ieps--08-01-2016.pdf>

¹¹ See reference #1.

Note: The illustration by Chris Buzelli on page 2 comes from Pamela Hollingsworth’s presentation *Saying “no” to expulsions and suspensions and “yes” to meaningful supports for children, teachers, and families*, online at: <https://grisnetwork.org/sites/all/files/conference-session/resources/543%20PPT%202.pdf>

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